

The Chasm of the Political in Postmodern Theory

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To speak of the “political” as a chasm within postmodern theory, as we have in the title of this paper, is to suggest a space or a void whose contents have yet to be named. Naming the contents becomes all the more difficult when we realize that postmodernism seeks to deconstruct the categories we have used to understand politics such as the distinction between “theory” and “practice.” For example, Readings argues that to speak of the relation between deconstruction and politics is to assume a distinction between the theoretical world of the “text” and the “literal” world of political practice (Readings 1989). In contrast, he suggests that the distinction itself must be viewed as a textual production that enables the terror of the “real”:

The “real” is the accomplished ground of injustice in that it is always the assertion of a nonmetaphorical voice, a pure literality. To appeal to the “real” is always to lend a voice to the state of things—what we do when we appeal to a “political reality” is to personify literality, to invoke a purely literal voice that would provide the criteria of justice, in that it would speak of nature (Readings 1989, 231).

Deploying a similarly antifoundationalist argument, Fraser and Nicholson (1988) contend that by abandoning enlightenment faith in the connection between truth and knowledge, postmodern theory relinquishes its position of privilege. The notion of “truth,” grounded in reason, promised a kind of politics in which the good of all could be served; politics could be carried out from a position of innocence (Flax 1992). In contrast, there is no “innocent” position when the focus is on the connection between “truth” and “power.” Thus, a postmodern stance implies the importance of listening:

We need to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf and to listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person's own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, and legitimated (Flax 1992, 460).

In raising the issue of the place of the "political" in postmodern theory we do not wish to imply a distinction between the textual world of theory and the literal world of practice. Rather, we want to view practice as textuality. We take seriously the claim of many postmodernists that to speak of the textual is not merely to speak of what occurs in books. We view the texts produced in practice as offering critical insights that need to be examined alongside of, and in tandem with, those offered within the pages of a book. But taking practice seriously as a text means that the practice of deconstruction must acknowledge that deconstruction takes place within a space that is often filled with essentialist claims that emerge in the everyday practice of politics.

As a way of entering into a discussion of the nature of the political in postmodern theory, this article considers two books that have been central to discussions of postmodern social theory. Laclau and Mouffe's (1989) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* present challenging critiques of the essentialisms that have provided the underpinnings for class and gender analysis. Laclau and Mouffe deconstruct Marxist theory with an eye toward revealing the evolution of the concept of hegemony as it emerges from tensions over the theoretical role of class in Marxist historical materialism and the actual place of class in the contingent political world. Butler trains her deconstructive analysis on the emergence of compulsory heterosexuality, revealing the silences in the works of Lévi-Strauss, Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva. Both texts highlight the essentialist blind spots that activists and theorists of social movements have shared and both reflect critically on what it means for theory to offer a positive contribution to contemporary politics.

In her preface, Butler writes, "Contemporary debates over the meanings of gender lead time and time again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism (1990, ix)." She consoles the reader that we should see this trouble in a positive light:

it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity? (1990, xi).

Thus, according to Butler our political projects will be radicalized by raising questions that challenge the "identities" long believed to be essential to progressive politics. Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe write in their introduction:

Left-wing thought today stands at a crossroads . . . the very wealth and plurality of contemporary social struggles has given rise to a theoretical crisis. It is at the middle point of this two-way movement between the theoretical and the political that our own discourse will be located (1989, 1–2).

By embracing the link between their theoretical project and political activism, Laclau and Mouffe and Butler challenge the sterility of much postmodern theory. But Laclau and Mouffe prematurely close the space of politics with a concept of radical democracy that marginalizes the concerns of women and nonwestern peoples. Butler, on the other hand, leaves politics radically undertheorized. In the conclusion of this paper we offer an alternative conception of politics which takes as its starting point the passions of living human subjects. We refer not to subjects in the modernist sense of self-present egos who operate out of a coherent identity and fixed interests, but still, subjects, seen as the provisional normative space that links critical theoretical projects to passionate political engagements.

An interpretive subject is an important component for any text that purports to have political significance, not because an interpretive subject has a privileged view—or even a potentially privileged position—but because acknowledgement of the existence of other interpretive subjects embodies the postmodern commitment to a decentered, antifoundationalist politics. Any theoretical treatment must acknowledge the passionate tensions that exist at times among different interpretations of politics. Thus, we need an interpretive subject, not as a grounding for our own political judgements, that is, as a privileged subject, but so as not to privilege the interpretive position of theorists.

In the following pages, we will show that both Laclau and Mouffe and Butler raise issues we see as important, but they inadequately address the passions that give any theory having pretensions to being political its appeal. Moreover, they fail to theorize the tensions between their own interpretation of politics and those that emerge from other forms of practice. As a result their texts fail to include any sense of their theoretical formulations as emerging from an interpretive subject (i.e., a hermeneutical approach), nor do they include the possibility that there are other interpretive subjects who are equally politically engaged and yet have a different understanding of the political.

The Discourse of Democracy

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe offer an analysis of the political that draws its strength not from a concept of a class subject but from the contingencies that arise as political demands are issued from different subject positions. They argue that political movements arise out of an articulation of a variety of antagonisms. As we shall argue in the following pages, their theory of antagonism contains internal problems which close the space they seem to have opened.

They begin with an analysis of the problematic position of class in Marxist theory: "the economic base is incapable of assuring class unity in the present; while politics, the sole terrain where that present unity can be constructed, is unable convincingly to guarantee the class character of the unitary subjects" (Laclau and Mouffe 1989, 36). If class unity does not emerge from an economic base, class analysis and class politics cannot claim to provide a basis for unifying other political demands. More importantly, there is no theoretical justification for arguing, as some orthodox Marxists might, that political movements that form around women's rights, racism, housing, and so on, are less significant than the class demands of workers.

With their commitment to the openness of the social and the centrality of antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe strive to recover and to extend the contingency of the social implied in Marxist notions of the dialectic and of overdetermination. Most Marxists close the contingency implied by these concepts with reference to a prediscursive reality which ensures the centrality of a class-based contradiction. But Laclau and Mouffe argue that we can never have access to a prediscursive, objectively contradictory reality upon which to base our social theory. They properly point out that the discursive character of all "reality" does not mean that we must abandon the notion that objects exist in the world: "What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence" (Laclau and Mouffe 1989, 108). Thus they criticize any use of the dialectic that implies necessary transitions, whether those necessary relations arise from a contradictory reality (Mao Zedong) or from an unfolding of a logic (Hegel) (Laclau and Mouffe 1989, 95).

According to Laclau and Mouffe an understanding of social movements must begin by looking into the antagonisms that emerge in the constitution of people as social agents. There are, however, ambiguities in Laclau and Mouffe's construction of antagonism. Early in the text, they write, "In so far as there is an antagonism I cannot be a full presence to myself" (1989, 125). As an example, they state, "it is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from the land" (1989, 125). Laclau and Mouffe seem to be saying that the peasant's identity is constituted in relation to social expectations and needs that are linked to access to land. When this land is taken away an antagonism emerges. But they never clarify why a social agent wants to be a full presence to itself. Is it necessary to have a coherent identity? We think not. We often find ourselves with senses of ourselves that are in conflict without finding this a problem. The idea that a self must have a coherent identity is standard fare in the humanist tradition, which supposes that identity is regulated by a coherent ego.

Laclau and Mouffe explicitly reject essentialist notions of the self in their later discussion of antagonism. They point out that relations of subordination establish no more than "a set of differential social positions between agents" (1989, 154). The transformation of those relations of subordination into antagonistic positions can

only occur when subordination is constituted as oppression through the emergence of a discourse that disrupts the positivity of the differential positions:

The base which makes this synonymy [subordination, oppression, domination] possible is, as is evident, the anthropological assumption of a "human nature" and of a unified subject: if we can determine a priori the essence of a subject, every relation which denies it automatically becomes a relation of oppression. But if we reject this essentialist perspective, we need to differentiate "subordination" from "oppression" and explain the precise conditions in which subordination becomes oppression (1989, 153).

Laclau and Mouffe define relations of subordination as those in which "an agent is subject to the decisions of another" (1989, 154). They want to limit "oppression" to only "those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonism" and to limit relations of domination to "the set of relations of subordination which are considered as illegitimate from the perspective, or in the judgement, of a social agent external to them" (1989, 154). They seem to be saying that a relationship of subordination is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a discourse of oppression and for recognition of domination. Subordination becomes politically significant only when it is articulated into a discourse of oppression. On this reading, antagonism exists only as an element of a discourse of oppression; the lack of full presence to oneself is no longer sufficient to constitute an antagonism.

By making antagonism contingent upon the emergence of discourses of oppression, Laclau and Mouffe represent all social movements as fundamentally dependent upon discourses that emerge from outside the discursively constituted experience of subordination. While Laclau and Mouffe use examples to illustrate the fit between discourses of democracy (read equality) and the emergence of social movements, they fail to recognize the problems with their own interpretations of history. Ultimately their interpretation of the place of radical democracy serves to place Laclau and Mouffe in the position of defining the tasks for social movements. They insist that movements be articulated in terms of radical democracy as a discursively constructed general equivalent able to unify a wide variety of social antagonisms:

To take the case of feminism . . . it is because women as women are denied a right which the democratic ideology recognizes in principle for all citizens that there appears a fissure in the construction of the subordinated feminine subject from which the antagonism may arise (1989, 159).

For Laclau and Mouffe the possibility that feminists may have different "readings" of their history or a different agenda is unimportant:

The logic of equivalence, then, taken to its ultimate consequences, would imply the dissolution of the autonomy of the spaces in which each one of these struggles is

constituted . . . because they have all become, strictly speaking, equivalent symbols of a unique and indivisible struggle (1989, 182).

Thus, while Laclau and Mouffe want to include organizing around women's issues as a part of progressive politics, they insist that feminists "acknowledge" their roots in democracy and by extension their links to other struggles.

The plurality of movements that we observe in the contemporary period, according to Laclau and Mouffe, arises out of the "rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations which is characteristic today of *advanced industrial societies*" (1989, 159; emphasis added). Here, they seem to be claiming that new social movements grow in a pluralistic way out of a single social formation. But how can we know that the underlying meaning of these movements is a unified structure and on what basis can we demand that movements align themselves with one another? Unity does not grow naturally out of the social formation and, as Laclau and Mouffe argue in their own criticism of class determinism, there is no position from which we could say that demands should be formed in terms of unity.

Laclau and Mouffe consistently argue that particularistic organizing creates problems when a movement constructs itself in such a way that it is unable to form links with other movements. They write:

The question of a hegemony which would come to threaten the autonomy of certain movements is, therefore, a badly posed problem. Strictly speaking, this incompatibility would only exist if the social movements were monads, disconnected one from another, but if the identity of each movement can never be acquired once and for all, then it cannot be indifferent to what takes place outside it (1989, 141).

But when they argue that particularism relies on a problematic assertion that movements grow out of wholly autonomous social dynamics, Laclau and Mouffe have set up a straw person.

Surely, movements grow out of an interaction with other movements but that does not mean that, at times, it might not be appropriate for each antagonism to develop its own articulation of reality in isolation before working to create unity with other movements. If we start from the view that society is structured through a variety of discourses of power, the way we fight them and what we are fighting have to be seen as variable. Changing relations between the sexes for example requires some mass street actions and some challenges to the state, but much of the struggle against sexism has taken place through the building of different forms of consciousness that then invade the fabric of everyday life. A theory of new social movements that does not see the value in dispersed as well as unitary movements misses its mark.

Instead of privileging the discourse of democracy, Laclau and Mouffe might have taken their analysis in a more consistently antiessentialist direction. The political would appear then as the constitution of oppression and its contention

through a variety of discursive formations. Some of these would establish chains of equivalence while others would constitute oppression as a unique expression of relations of race, class, gender, empire, or any other salient category. In short, the theoretical would establish the importance of the political as the constitution of discursive formations that proliferate antagonisms while leaving the space of the political practice radically open.

With their two different theories of the emergence of antagonisms, Laclau and Mouffe have made the task of political movements seem unrealistically easy. Antagonisms appear to float freely; as long as we can offer a coherent narrative according to which social agents can recognize themselves as fully present, we can build discourses by offering discursive equivalents. This approach minimizes the historical and cultural ballast that discourses carry with them. If I am merely a discursively constituted individual looking for a coherent sense of self or if my political claims are irrelevant except when a social theorist can make sense of them, then oppositional politics can ignore the messy and contradictory claims that emerge from political practice. But such an approach reinstates a problematic relation between “theory” and “practice.”

Butler's Gender Trouble

While Laclau and Mouffe's text aims to transform Marxist class politics, Butler's project emerges from her desire to reconstitute the terms of feminist politics. She aims to expose the workings of the heterosexual matrix through which naturalized categories of male and female serve as a pseudo-foundation for western theorizing of gender and subjectivity. Through an examination of the movement at which the theorist resorts to the body—its supposedly natural division into male and female—to explain social behavior or childhood sexual development, Butler attempts to capture the violent closure of alternative representations of sexuality and bodily form. She argues for a radical deconstruction of the physical “body” which will leave behind no residue of the natural. In its place, Butler argues that sex/gender categories and, by extension, heterosexual desire are discursive constructs of a paternal law whose effects can be seen even in feminist theory.

Butler takes issue with Julia Kristeva's attempt to ground an emancipatory moment in primary maternal drives. Kristeva's work is informed by a feminist project that seeks to locate a source for the disruptions of the paternal law in a maternal principle. Drawing on the work of Lacan, Kristeva concedes that the Symbolic, that which structures meaningful language, is linked to the paternal. But, where Lacan maintained that the emergence of the Symbolic required the repression of maternal drives, Kristeva argues that the maternal connection constantly re-emerges in the poetic uses of language. Poetry draws on what Kristeva asserts is an original libidinal multiplicity of meanings which resists the kind of closure that facilitates the uses of language in everyday life. The presence of poetic possibilities,

themselves echoes of maternal drives, forms the basis for Kristeva's notion of feminist politics (Kristeva 1980).

Butler asks, "how do we know that the instinctual object of Kristeva's discourse is not a construction of the discourse itself? And what grounds do we have for positing this object, this multiplicitous field as prior to signification?" (Butler 1990, 88). Butler is bothered because Kristeva has grounded her notion of feminine drives in the "maternal body":

Her [Kristeva's] postulation of a prediscursive corporeal multiplicity becomes all the more problematic when we discover that maternal drives are considered part of a "biological destiny" and are themselves manifestations of "a non-Symbolic, nonpaternal causality." The pre-Symbolic, nonpaternal causality is for Kristeva, a semiotic maternal causality, or, more specifically, a teleological conception of maternal instincts (Butler 1990, 89).

Kristeva wants us to look to the poetic other of the paternal law for access to a feminine other. But this feminine other is rooted in a biological understanding of maternity which, as part of a heterosexual matrix, marginalizes sexual practices and identities that do not work according to its logic.

In contrast to Kristeva, Monique Wittig finds an emancipatory ideal not in maternity but, more akin to Butler, in challenging any basis for defining physical bodies in terms of the categories male and female. For Wittig, gender identity is a war of intertextual strategies waged against the body's possibilities. The distinction between male and female is always already caught up in a politics of heterosexuality and reproduction. Furthermore, "sex" is designated in language really only in relation to the particular position of the "female"; the "male" remains undesignated, thereby claiming the position of the universal subject. Within this linguistic play, "women" becomes a marker in a power game in which that which is "female" always occupies the subordinate position. By refusing a heterosexual relationship, the lesbian occupies the position of a third gender (Wittig 1975).

Butler applauds Wittig's recognition of the way gender categories invade the designation of the physical body as either male or female.

Is there a "physical" body prior to the perceptually perceived body? An impossible question to decide. Not only is the gathering of attributes under the category of sex suspect, but so is the very discrimination of the "features" themselves. That penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth, are named sexual parts is both a restriction of the erogenous body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole (Butler 1990, 114).

But Butler also sees Monique Wittig as someone who has challenged the heterosexual matrix only to become embedded in it:

In a self-consciously defiant imperialist strategy, Wittig argues that only by taking up the universal and absolute point of view, effectively lesbianizing the entire world, can the compulsory order of heterosexuality be destroyed (1990, 120).

And yet, Butler argues, by seeing the lesbian as fundamentally opposed to the heterosexual, rather than seeing both as mutually implicated discourses, Wittig takes as a starting point the very heterosexual matrix her work attempts to destroy.

What a tragic mistake, then, to construct a gay/lesbian identity through the same exclusionary means, as if the excluded were not, precisely through its exclusion, always presupposed and, indeed, required for the construction of that identity. Such an exclusion, paradoxically, institutes precisely the relation of radical dependency it seeks to overcome: Lesbianism then would require heterosexuality (1990, 128).

Such formulations reassert the very categories that Butler sees as in need of challenge and unwittingly sustain the patriarchal law:

The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation (1990, 93).

For Butler, all attempts to posit a theoretical ground for the political in a space "outside" of the hegemonic construction of compulsory heterosexuality fail because they take part in essentialisms not substantially different from those that construct compulsory heterosexuality. Kristeva's unquestioning acceptance of the given meaning of the maternal and Wittig's definition of lesbianism as the other of heterosexism are seen as woven around the same heterosexual matrix that Butler shows to be problematic. Thus, the outside to a discourse of power is shown to be implicated in it.

This repositioning of the "outside" as a product of the "inside" of cultural domination enables Butler to account for a politics of subversion without ever positing a repressed subject whose experience of repression grounds political practice. In Butler's analysis, "repression" emerges simultaneously with cultural production; it is one with the process of cultural production, not the voice of a subject seeking an irrecoverable origin. And as a result, there is no repressed subject to be liberated. Instead there is a range of culturally constructed possibilities, some sanctioned, others relegated to the margins, but always present. The agent of her subversive politics is a construct of the discourse. It could not be otherwise because, as Butler has argued, the Law creates its own margins. Acts of subversion emerge out of the steady invasion of that which is sanctioned by that which is marginalized. Thus, Butler aims to establish a level playing field for the terrain of the political, one in which both the subversive and the dominant culture acknowledge their common heritage. Butler's suspicions of frameworks that rely upon the construction of a space outside of the cultural order for the emergence of subversion follows from her approach to textual analysis.

Rather than constructing an entirely new basis for understanding gender ambiguity, Butler draws on the works of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Freud, Kristeva, and others to expose the limits of their analysis. Why didn't Lacan take the comedic dimension

of heterosexuality further to expose the total masquerade involved in constructing these two divergent sexual positions? she asks. Why did Freud, in his formulation of the Oedipal complex, ignore the possibilities of a young boy's sexual attraction to his father? For Butler, these questions are inherent in the texts themselves and are in a sense enabled by the text. Her own subversive challenge to the text comes, not from outside of the text, but rather from a deep engagement with the text. Indeed, Butler argues that subversion can only come from a "recognition" of the way in which that which is "excluded" is in fact fully "inside" the dominant culture as a concrete cultural possibility (1990, 77).

Butler finds parallels for her textual subversions in the street politics of the gay and lesbian movements in which agents claim mobile identities already signified within the terms of culture. Butler's street politics is located not in the social movements around gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights but around everyday practices that undermine the "natural": the reappropriation of terms of derision such as dyke, queer, and fag within the gay and lesbian community; the reappropriation of female gender terms by gay men, and so forth (1990, 122). In such everyday language play, all identities are revealed as effects of signifying practices. "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enables the repetition itself" (1990, 148). The political, which Butler locates at the level of signifying practices, ultimately depends on a playful destabilization of categories that rework the normative framework of society. Clearly Butler does not intend her notion of playful parody to be taken as an inconsequential game. Rather she uses parody as a "deep play" that reconfigures the normative social order in a positive direction; one that is presumably better than configurations based on notions of gender that take sex as natural.¹

There are two questions that need to be asked about the politics of Butler's text. The first has to do with her own passions as a social theorist: Why does Butler believe that it is so important to open the space in which gender identity is constituted and, more generally, what motivates the postmodern fascination with the "limit" as the place where arbitrary and contingent constraints are revealed (Foucault 1987, 171)? The second question addresses the problem of other "interpretive subjects": how does Butler's antifoundationalist position intersect with more foundationalist constructions of the political?

Butler clearly illustrates that theoretical understandings of sexuality are constructed around an untheorized paternal law that links sex, gender, and desire. But, why should this discursive closure be a matter of concern for the social theorist or anyone else? One could argue that Butler merely wants to open the intellectual

1. Clifford Geertz uses the notion of "deep play" in his now famous article on the Balinese cockfight to point out that what appears on the surface as a playful game in fact maps distinctions in social status onto a game in which esteem, honor, dignity, and respect are at stake (Geertz 1973). Geertz is careful to note, however, that although the stakes are high, the cockfight always remains a game in which the order can be played with but never permanently reworked. Butler's politics seem to suggest that parody can rework the social order because it casts doubt on the "natural."

space within which we think about the body and about gender identity. But Butler, herself, faults Foucault for an approach that ultimately leads him to romanticize the position of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite:

we fail to discover multiplicity as Foucault would have us do; instead, we confront a fatal ambivalence . . . which for all its effects of happy dispersal nevertheless culminates in Herculine's suicide (Butler 1990, 99).

Foucault has analyzed Barbin's position as one of freedom from an imposed and arbitrary gender order, but Butler suggests we must deal with the human consequences as well.² But how could we recognize such tragedies and, by extension, the political significance of Butler's work, if her project and her readers were not reading her at least partially from within a humanist tradition that survives in the shadow of postmodernism?

Postmodernism argues that the human subject cannot occupy a privileged position because all the religious, scientific, and political principles on which humanism has depended are in doubt. As a result, we cannot look on the human subject as a grounding for ethical judgements but rather as an index of the consequences of a cultural order, as a position from which a human subject makes a sense of and experiences power. Because we find Herculine Barbin's suicide tragic, we are able to see the point that Butler wants to make. Namely, that Foucault's analysis of Herculine's ambivalence must be incomplete. In contrast, Butler's analysis seems more adequate because it shows not only the theoretical failings of the heterosexual matrix but also its tragic consequences. But, once we have opened a space for the place of an interpretive subject within our discussion of the political, the possibility

2. Butler's "ethical" position in this portion of the text seems to be ambivalently located between a concern with freedom, which she shares with Foucault, and a recognition of the limitation of an ethic of freedom. Foucault points out that our concerns with "limits" and our orientation toward a "philosophical *ethos* that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era" reflect ourselves as beings historically constituted by the enlightenment (Foucault 1987, 167). But in contrast to the enlightenment, contemporary criticism no longer moves toward defining the universal, necessary, or obligatory, but rather the singular, contingent, and arbitrary (170). In place of the enlightenment emphasis on exposing the limit as necessary, contemporary critique aims to reveal the limit as arbitrary, a point of *potential* transgression. The possibility of transgression holds forth the promise of "freedom" but not in the sense of liberation. Foucault points out:

I prefer even these partial transformations [in our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, between the sexes, etc.] that have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century (171).

Skepticism about promises of liberation leads Foucault to reconceptualize politics in the direction of establishing a new ethos that emphasizes critique of "identity" through historical analysis and experimentation with going beyond the limits that define "identity." But, paradoxically, one must wonder if this vision of a new ethos does not portend some of the same problems we now recognize in the enlightenment notion of rationality. How will this "new ethos" avoid becoming a universal standard in relationship to which all other attitudes fall short? How can we allow diverse attitudes to flourish while at the same time establishing a "new ethos"? When asked about contemporary problems, Foucault once said "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad . . . I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger" (Foucault 1983, 233). Perhaps this orientation toward the limit is also a danger.

for different interpretations arises. And, different interpretations might pose problems for Butler's theory of parody.

Although Butler does not explicitly claim that parody is the best form of politics, she is silent about any other forms of political practice. We wonder if the practices of gender bending and creative identity play would be as powerful or as appealing if the reader did not recognize these activities in connection to a broader gay and lesbian movement that is often foundationalist in its claim. Undoubtedly, attention to concrete social movements around such issues as the rights of gay and lesbian couples to the trappings of culturally sanctioned relations might complicate Butler's interpretive terrain. Indeed, foundationalist claims might be shown to be no less a part of progressive social movements than Butler's own radical antifoundationalist position and her insistence on antifoundationalism might prove to be a subtle reworking of the privileged position of theory over practice. To avoid this she chooses not to speak about social movements, avoiding closing the space of the political as do Laclau and Mouffe with their concept of democracy. At the same time, however, she misses an opportunity to theorize the political as a genuinely open space variously constructed by different interpretive subjects. Clearly her textual deconstruction of the naturalness of the heterosexual matrix complements the subversive practice of parody, but must we leave other social movements untheorized?

In her preface, which focuses on feminist theory, Butler asks, "to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of the self?" We think that she has shown some ways that it does. The question concerns Butler because she believes that a feminism that excludes the possibility of undermining sex/gender categories ultimately excludes those who find themselves alienated by an overly rigid construction of gender identity, even when those constructs emerge in the name of feminism. Butler's insights notwithstanding, there are political projects that take as their starting point notions of common identity. And Butler fails to show that the attempt to locate a common identity always or only reinforces the discourse of power identified as the heterosexual matrix.

If written texts can echo political practice, we might well find a key to theorizing the place of identity claims in politics in the notion of intertextuality. Although Butler is not arguing for a reassertion of the "real" as anything but socially constructed, her project can be located within a set of discursive constructs that emerge not only out of social theory but also out of political movements. The political field is structured through a multiplicity of discourses, some essentialist, some not. They lean on one another in complex and contradictory ways. Humanism, essentialism, and foundationalism may all be self-contradictory in their claim to a solidity that they lack; yet it is a foundationalist demand that they should be solid.

Perhaps unwittingly, the politics of Butler's work ultimately depends on the same mechanisms of power that she criticizes in the heterosexual matrix: she must

intervene into everyday practices with a theoretical foundation that privileges certain meanings over others and in the process silences others. She rejects both the material body as a locus for the natural and the privileging of the "outside" on which the radical critical interpretation depends. In order to craft the political significance of everyday practices which could be "read" in a variety of ways, a radical antifoundationalism must become the foundation of a reworking of the structures of signification. In short, rather than entertain a multiplicity of meanings, Butler ends up arguing for the primacy of the antifoundationalist reading that informs her own theoretical project.

By failing to address the place of unities formed through claims to common identities, Butler can easily be read as setting new rules for discourse according to which only deconstructive moves are to be seen as challenges to power. Within circles where postmodern analysis is dominant a new political dogmatism is developing, according to which antifoundationalist or deconstructive critiques are the only ones that one can legitimately engage in. Foundationalism needs to be criticized when it works to construct discourses of hegemonic power, but it is also important to reject an antifoundationalism that offers itself as a foundation. Discourses that are wrapped in humanist and foundationalist garb have provided the motivations that underlie much political practice that we take to be positive. Indeed, the discourse of "basic human rights" that have been violated and claims about the deep significance of identity in shaping a world view, however problematic, at times provoke powerful passions which inspire political commitments. Although one would not want to assert that essentialist claims are a necessary component of the political, it is equally misleading to fix the position of such claims as essentially supporting power structures. Rather, a truly nonessentialist conception of the political would recognize the multiple and contradictory outcomes that can result from a variety of political claims, including a deconstructionist approach to politics.

Conclusion

Postmodernism illuminates the nonessential nature of social conflictuality and offers an understanding of politics that begins from the discursively constructed social world. Once we begin to take seriously the challenges that postmodernism raises for radical politics, it becomes clear that the position of theory in politics must be radically reformulated. If there are no privileged metanarratives to which we can appeal, theory loses its status as the privileged source of knowledge. This central claim has led postmodern theorists interested in radical politics in several different directions. Some, like Butler, have taken it to mean that a postmodern politics must avoid essentialist and foundationalist claims and limit its form of critique to deconstructivist moves. Others, like Laclau and Mouffe, have closed the space of the political by asserting a foundation that they claim is nonessentialist but that, as we have argued, creates radical democracy as the foundation upon which politics

should be built. Both of these trends have privileged the discursive interventions of those traditionally seen as social theorists.

In light of postmodernist analysis, theory is shown to be a form of discursive intervention in a political space constituted by a variety of discourses that lean on one another in complex ways.³ The identities and concerns of social agents are constituted through a multiplicity of discursive practices which are generated from a variety of social locations. They are not constituted merely by the discourses of political theorists. Postmodernism takes away from us any position from which we could say that the discourses of professional theorists have any position of privilege over the articulations of other social agents. The theorist is a socially constituted agent among many, intervening in a sphere already inhabited by complex discourses and agents constituted through them. Theory, then, is only one form of discursive intervention among many.

The concept of the interpretive subject can offer us an understanding of discursive practice that shows the commonality between the practices of theorists and other social actors. Meaning, not just its linguistic expression, is central to the interpretive subject. While postmodern language theory draws attention to free-floating signifiers and therefore to the infinite possibilities of language, meaning highlights the constraints on interpretation created by a hermeneutical circle. As Charles Taylor points out:

An emotion term like "shame," for instance, essentially refers us to a certain kind of situation, the "shameful," or "humiliating," and a certain mode of response, that of hiding oneself, of covering up, or else "wiping out" the blot. That is, it is essential to this feeling's identification as shame that it be related to this situation and give rise to this type of disposition (Taylor 1987, 42).

The essentialism of the hermeneutical subject does not imply a fixed, unchanging, universal relationship of something within a discursive field. Rather, it refers to possible sites of contestation and to connections that provoke powerful passions within an interpretive subject, passions that help the theorists appreciate the "sense" behind politics.⁴ Thus, to extrapolate from Taylor's example, the contradictory passions generated around the notion of "coming out" in the gay and lesbian community need to be understood in relation to cultural constructions of the self, integrity, and truth, as well as notions of the family. As Weston found among the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco,

3. We concur with Laclau's notion of discourse as more than an operation of language. He writes, "Because every social action has *meaning*, it is constituted in the form of discursive sequences that articulate linguistic and extra linguistic elements" (Laclau 1988, 71).

4. In speaking of passions we do not mean to suggest the possibility of universal feelings that are prior to discourse. Rather, we resort to the notion of passion in order to recover some sense of a culturally constituted political subject whose emotions are "a primary idiom for defining and negotiation social relations of the self in a moral order" (see Lutz and White 1986, 419). The concept of passion accounts for the force that draws social agents to political action and produces the powerful moods and motivations that sustain political alliances over time, without resorting to problematic notions of rational self-interest.

Subjective identification as a lesbian was presumed to have occurred through an internal dialogue in which she “came to terms” or “made peace” with herself. Self-acceptance could facilitate unification of the inner self, but without disclosure to others this self would remain trapped in the private, interior space known as the closet (Weston 1992, 50).

The imaginary of the “closet” makes political claims on our sensibilities because it suggests that people find themselves with desires that are socially proscribed.⁵ While acknowledging that “making peace with the self” suggests a foundationalist standpoint, it is also clear that such identity assertions have been central to the formation of gay and lesbian politics in this country.

While experience is always discursively constructed and mediated, when we talk about politics there has to be some reference to the experiences of a subject lest theory lose its critical edge as part of a political project. Since the world is infinitely complex, it can be described in an infinite number of ways. What makes one description better than another is that it is able to challenge discourses of power. But the descriptions of discourses of power are stripped of an important political moment if they are not able to draw on our passions. We create political theory and participate in political movements because something seems to be not right with reality as it is. While we may not be able to come to any firm conclusions about the nature of what is wrong with reality, it is this moment of discontent that generates critical activities. We need to conceptualize radical theory as emanating from an interpretive subject, a subject that finds itself created through these discourses and yet created in a problematic way. The subject may be Laclau and Mouffe’s peasant who cannot be a peasant, it may be an organization or movement, it may be Butler’s queer, and it may be Butler herself. In any case, the theory has a claim to being political when it addresses a power dynamic that the interpretive subject finds unlivable or at least unpleasant.

One of the attractions for many people of traditional Marxism as a revolutionary theory was that it offered an analysis of the social world and a program for action that seemed to follow logically from it. Marxism has had enormous power in constructing a hegemonic social imaginary that has had the ability to articulate and construct powerful social passions. Perhaps because of the legacy of Marxism as the paradigm of radical theory, many postmodern radicals theorize as though practice is subordinate to theory. It is our hope that the presence of postmodern analysis on the

5. The experience of something as a problem is itself always already discursively constituted. When a man in an office makes a sexualized comment to a woman, in the United States this is now understood as sexual harassment. Before the contemporary discourse of feminism, this would not have been the case. The woman might have felt embarrassed, angry, disgusting, or disgusted, or she might have been flattered. An action is always experienced as meaningful. We understand actions to the extent that we see them as meaningful. Before the discourse of sexual harassment, the action may not have been experienced or conceptualized as a negative one. But the fact that many women have been very willing to articulate their experiences according to the general equivalent of harassment shows that this discursive articulation answers some needs for meaning of the agents involved.

Left will lead to a reconfiguration of the relationship between theory and practice, according to which we understand as theory a variety of discursive articulations arising out of a variety of social locations. The theorist then becomes one actor in the political field among many. In order to reformulate a radical approach to political discourse, we must address the issue of how claims to common identities provoke powerful, albeit problematic, political passions that divide, as well as unite, diverse subject positions. Sometimes the passions that motivate a social movement will be fiercely essentialist and thereby resistant to deconstructionist projects. In other contexts deconstruction of the hegemonic categories of identity may help forge new and more powerful commitments. In either case, it is important in our understanding of the nature of social theory that we recognize the potentially abrasive surface between discourses.

There is no solid ground upon which we can construct a critical politics. All we have to work on is our lived experience which we know to be constructed and mediated through language embedded in power relations. Language communities weave narratives of meaning that articulate a wide variety of experiences. These networks of meaning articulate and construct passions in ways that allow for some political formations and limit others. Thus, the concept of antagonisms exists only through the frustrated expectations of social agents created and articulated as members of language communities. The reason we want a critical politics is that we experience "reality" as problematic. Postmodernism gives us a good jumping off point for understanding this contingent nature of critical theory. What few postmodernist thinkers have spent enough time doing is clarifying the relationship between their theory and the practices that they gesture to.

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